

Correspondence

A National Health Program

TO THE EDITOR: The political commentary, "Why It's Time for a National Health Program in the United States," by Waitzkin in the January issue¹ reveals that despite the extensive experience of numerous other countries with attempts to provide universal health care, at least among some persons the lessons have not been learned. There is no way on earth that all of the medical needs of an aging society can be covered without limitation. Whether the limitations and rationing are applied randomly by application of financial criteria, as in the United States, or by policy in which particular procedures are denied to particular groups, as in the United Kingdom, some form of rationing has to occur. Dr Waitzkin's article is based on the assumption that there is an entitlement to health care. This is a value judgment that may be imposed on the rest of us by political muscle but has no independent or objective validity. No one has an entitlement to the product of my time and energy or that of any other physician, proposals for national health insurance to the contrary.

Dr Waitzkin may well be correct that such a program is inevitable in the United States; that will not make it either useful, efficient, or an improvement in the long run over the current system.

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REFERENCE

1. Waitzkin H: Why it's time for a national health program in the United States. *West J Med* 1989 Jan; 150: 101-107

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TO THE EDITOR: Dr Howard Waitzkin's commentary in the January issue¹ should be required reading for everyone in the health field. It is a blueprint for socialistic disaster! It is hard to believe that an MD, PhD could have reached that august position with no apparent schooling in fundamental economics or civics.

The premise of Dr Waitzkin's assertion is this: "The fundamental assumption of an NHP [National Health Program] is that universal entitlement to adequate health care is a basic human right." I don't agree with that assumption, and I hope, after reading my commentary, that no one else will either.

The problem with granting a "right" to one person is that it *always* takes away a "right" from someone else. Because one right is exclusive of another, we have to be very careful in proclaiming it. For example, if a citizen has an entitlement to adequate health care as a right, those who provide that care *do not* have the right to withhold it. To ensure this "basic human right," the government is charged to see that this care is provided and is also charged with prescribing what and how much care is to be given. This must be done within the government's fiscal restraints, and so the government will also determine how much is to be paid for these services.

What started as a "basic human right" has been at the cost of the patient's individual freedom to choose what is to be done; he or she has abrogated this to the state. The health care provider in the same process has been forced to provide a service for a price determined at the whim of a prodigal government. What before was an honorable profession is

now a state of civil servitude. While before the responsibility was to the individual, now the responsibility is to the state.

With socialism, everyone loses. The price is too high; freedom is too precious. Socialistic ombudsmen are quick to assert that the medical profession has become obsessed with financial aggrandizement. They would argue that the true healer is altruistic and that economic discussions are somehow demeaning to the medical profession.

What is a fundamental assertion is that there cannot be individual freedom without economic freedom. Our country and way of life are based on this principle. When a person's worth is dictated by an arbitrary process, that person is a slave. If this can be done to the medical profession, it can be done to all—a mere extension of "basic rights" to include all and, of course, exclude all is true socialistic doublethink.

Adequate health care is not a "basic human right." For that matter, neither is adequate nutrition nor shelter nor everything in life that we as individuals must strive for. In America we call this "the pursuit of happiness." It is not the "gift of happiness."

Dr Waitzkin dedicated his article to the memory of Mr Abe Boxerman, an activist for the rights of senior citizens. I would like to dedicate my commentary to the millions of Americans who have died in many wars for the cause of personal freedom for all, not just senior citizens.

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REFERENCE

1. Waitzkin H: Why it's time for a national health program in the United States. *West J Med* 1989; 150: 101-107

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TO THE EDITOR: After reading Dr Waitzkin's comprehensive article in the January issue,¹ I passed through several phases of reaction. Hostility went to amusement and ultimately I was left with a subtle, gnawing sense of fear. I imagine the upper middle class citizens in the dying decades of the First Roman Republic may have experienced such real apprehension, as well as the hard-working citizens of capitalist Czechoslovakia in the immediate post-World War II period, when their democracy was subverted and overthrown by socialists backed by the USSR.

The United States is humanity's finest bastion of personal freedom. It is truly the only real deterrent to world socialism (Marxist or by any other name). Our example is closely watched by other countries. Our people are not socialist by nature. All recent elections have demonstrated this fact. Third party (government) redistribution of the wealth is a popular concept in Cuba, Albania, the USSR, etc. It began its infiltration of our democratic/capitalist society during the New Deal of the 1930s. We now have millions of people who are third generation welfare recipients. Many have been crippled morally and emotionally by the welfare system. Our founding fathers designed a magnificent system to permit our citizens to work and to compete. Freedom comes with a price. It also allows one the freedom to fail. "Big Brother" politicians have for years promised other people's hard-earned monies for votes from the members of the less affluent sectors of society. Thank God that this trend was slowed and reversed during the past eight years. When Mr Bush said,